

Chapter One

Rhonda Russell stepped off the bus at Court Square and walked down Main Street in Springfield, Massachusetts. She could have transferred to another bus and stepped off right in front of the dance studio, but she preferred the walk. It was the third Tuesday in September, and a few leaves on the big maple tree in the square were already turning gold. Rhonda glanced at the tree only momentarily, noting its presence, but hardly coming out of her reverie long enough to admire the foliage.

She was used to the city's smells now, but there had been a time when they made her sick. The first time, when she was fourteen, she had turned around and taken the very next bus back to East Longmeadow, the little town outside Springfield, where she and her mother lived in their comfortable but unpretentious house. When she arrived home that day, her feelings of sickness subsided gradually and evaporated completely by suppertime. But the tongue lashing her mother gave her penetrated much deeper, and she was much longer in recuperating from that than from the physical ailment.

The next week she stayed in the city, even though she felt like vomiting. At the studio one afternoon, she rested a few minutes on the sofa of the waiting room until her nausea subsided, then continued with her dancing lessons. As the weeks progressed, the feelings of sickness came less frequently.

And now, at twenty-one, Rhonda hardly remembered the physical agony of those first few weeks. Besides, Springfield was sweet smelling compared to New York City. Rhonda hated the thought of living in New York permanently. It was bad enough spending the summers there. All night long, or so it seemed, sirens blared, as fire engines or police cars raced to fires or accidents in various parts of the city.

In New York the higher her hotel apartment was located, the more sirens Rhonda heard. And in the summer the heat was oppressive. In the evenings she developed terrible cramps in her legs as she walked from the air-conditioned buildings out into the city heat. But New York City was a must every summer. Rhonda studied dancing there at the better-known schools and performed evenings in places where she could be seen by the right people. But she had refused a job as a chorus girl in a lower-class nightclub outside the city, because she could make more money around home.

LOVE STORY

Rhonda walked along the city sidewalk, her dancing case bouncing rhythmically against her leg, and thought of her many job opportunities in the Springfield area.

Around here she could make plenty of money. During the school year she taught at her dancing teacher's studio on Mondays and Wednesdays. On Tuesdays she spent the afternoon and evening at the studio working out and studying in her teacher's most advanced classes - classes attended by teachers from the surrounding towns as well, for everyone agreed Lynita was the best teacher around. When traveling theater groups visited Storrowtown, their dancers often dropped in at Lynita's for brush-up lessons. Even the top skaters went to Lynita for ballet lessons when the Ice Capades appeared in Springfield.

Teaching was OK around the first part of the week, when things were dull; but Rhonda made the most money evenings and weekends, when she worked for the Springfield Entertainment Bureau. Her agent, Tony, booked her for appearances at shows and nightclubs all over southern New England.

Rhonda packed three or four costumes when she entertained. If the audience was high-class and the event a sophisticated one, she might don a long, ruffle-skirted costume and do a difficult Spanish routine with castanets, which that class of people could appreciate. If the audience seemed middle-class and excitement-seeking, she might wear a sparkling sequined outfit and do a flashing tapping routine, ending with cartwheels, aerial flips, and splits. If she appeared at stag parties where the men were all half drunk and rowdy, Rhonda would put on the closest-fitting costume she owned - with no long skirts or ruffles that a pie-eyed man could grab onto. Then she would do a suggestive jazz number and make a quick getaway, stopping only long enough to pick up her sheet music and thank the orchestra for playing it so well, or when there was no orchestra, to pack up her records and portable phonograph.

At the present, however, Rhonda's best dance number was a Hawaiian routine, which she saved for only the better nightclubs and which required audience participation. In this routine Rhonda came on stage barefoot, wearing a grass skirt, halter top, and a flowered lei around her neck. After the completion of a dreamy dance to a Hawaiian love song Rhonda would call two men out of the audience to come up and help her. She would put grass skirts and leis on them and then teach them the basic Hawaiian step, which consists of two sidesteps to the right followed by two sidesteps to the left.

LOVE STORY

Then the orchestra would play another Hawaiian love song, and the audience would laugh itself hoarse watching the two men trying to continue the two-step as they imitated Rhonda's graceful Hawaiian arm movements. After the men returned to their seats, Rhonda would finish her routine with the Hawaiian War Chant, a lively dance that looked much more difficult than it really was, partly because the music and the footwork went so fast.

This Hawaiian number was by far Rhonda's best. The local nightclubs, and some in Connecticut, were beginning to clamor for repeat performances. She had made a deal with Tony to get double the money whenever she performed this dance by request. It brought Tony more money too.

"Except for Arturo, the magician and hypnotist, you're my best-paid performer," Tony had said at their last meeting.

Labor Day weekend she had really earned a bundle. She had been booked for three shows each night: a seven o'clock show at one club, a ten o'clock show at another, and a midnight show at still another club. Three shows, four nights in a row - Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday - had netted her almost a thousand dollars. And it would have come to much more than that if all her shows had been repeat performances of her Hawaiian routine. That's the way to pick up quick, easy money, Rhonda thought.

Her pace quickened. She absently hummed a tune as she neared the dance studio. Up to now Rhonda had found it necessary to keep a record book to make sure she didn't perform the same dance to the same music in the same costume at the same club twice in succession. She had to make up new costumes and improvise her dance routines to assure the audiences of something new with each performance. But with the Hawaiian routine she never had to worry about such things. When people requested the Hawaiian number, she knew they wanted - and expected - a repeat performance. It made things so much easier.

In a few months now, she and Carlton, her fiance, would have enough money to buy the land outside of Hartford. She had helped Carlton buy the racing car he wanted and some mechanic's tools; and, after they bought the property they had their eyes on, they could start saving for the house.

She visualized the house they would build; and as she walked up the busy sidewalk, she was only partly conscious of her surroundings. Glancing up, Rhonda saw a group of teenagers crowding toward her on her left, and as she swerved quickly to the right to avoid hitting them,

LOVE STORY

she bumped into a man coming out of a pet shop. She fell down ungracefully, while the empty metal cages the man was carrying clattered onto the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry. Are you hurt?" He was a young man, about her age, with dark hair and a friendly face. "I guess I was clumsy."

"No. It wasn't your fault, really," Rhonda insisted. "I was daydreaming and not paying attention."

He picked up her dancing case with one hand and helped Rhonda to her feet with the other. He was strong and big and taller than Carlton.

"Can you walk? Are there any bruises?" he asked.

"I scraped my knee a little. See, I tore a hole in my pants." Ordinarily Rhonda would have stuck on a bandage and continued on her way without further ado. Scrapes and bruises were all a part of a dancer's life; dancers never made anything of their aches and pains. But the young man's gentle manner unsettled Rhonda, and she felt he was really interested. She lifted her pant leg and examined the knee she had fallen on. It was lacerated and bleeding profusely. As they watched, drops of blood fell on her shoe. The young man pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at the wound, which filled up as rapidly as he cleaned it.

"I think it needs a stitch. Maybe two," he said.

"Oh, no. I can't stop now." Rhonda had heard that stitches were painful. "I'll just put a butterfly bandage on it."

"There's a first-aid kit in the cab." Without waiting for an answer, the young man hurried to a green pickup truck parked at the curb and fished under the seat. Rhonda saw some metal cages in the back of the truck; so she lifted one of the fallen cages onto the tailgate. The cage doors wouldn't slide shut properly.

"Never mind those. Let's get the leg taken care of."

Very few people were truly gentle with Rhonda, and she was torn between embarrassment and pleasure over the young man's doctoring. Carlton would have been annoyed at the inconvenience, and Mother would have scolded: "You're so ungraceful offstage. So clumsy. No one would ever know you were a dancer."

Her bruise cleaned and covered with petroleum jelly, a sturdy butterfly bandage over the cut, and a sterile white strip of sheeting around her leg, Rhonda finally thanked the man and picked up her case.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?" he asked.

LOVE STORY

“Thank you. But I go right up here.” She pointed to a stairway between the pet shop and the drugstore.

“You’d better stay off that leg for a while. It might start bleeding again.”

“Yes, I’ll have to baby it. I hope I haven’t ruined your cages or made you late for anything.”

“I’m in no hurry.” The young man smiled. “Maybe the Lord had a hand in this. You know, ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’

“Is that from the Bible?”

“Sure is. Romans 8:28. Do you have a Bible?”

“Yes,” Rhonda answered. “But I don’t remember reading that text before.”

“It’s one of my favorites.” He pulled a pamphlet from his inside pocket and handed it to her. “If you like religious things, maybe this will interest you.”

Rhonda thanked him again, bade him good-bye, and then limped up the stairs to the second-floor studio thinking, “He’s awfully young to be a minister.”

Inside the studio the other girls clustered around her.

“Who was that handsome fellow you captured on the sidewalk?” Cecile asked.

“You sure know how to pick the good-looking ones,” Patty said.

“What’s his name?” Louise asked.

“I don’t know. I think he’s a minister. He gave me this.” Rhonda showed them the pamphlet.

“What luck.” “I shoulda known - ” Patty and Louise walked away.

“Yeah,” Cecile agreed. “I knew he was too handsome to be normal.”

Were ministers that bad? Rhonda wondered. The new pastor at the Congregational Church where she and her mother went seemed far removed from his congregation. His sermons were very boring - mostly reports of books he had read and his personal opinions about them. Pastor Johnson, the previous minister, had been vibrant and young in spirit, though he was in his late forties or early fifties. He preached about Jesus; he wove Bible texts into his sermons; he told stories that brought tears to many eyes and made the listeners want to be better people. Rhonda really missed Pastor Johnson’s preaching. Since he had left, Rhonda felt God’s presence had left the church too. Maybe this young man was like Pastor Johnson. He seemed to know the Bible and

LOVE STORY

to know God too. She wished she had asked his name and church affiliation. She would like to have heard one of his sermons.

Her leg throbbed now. Rhonda took an aspirin and began her lessons, but in a short time a dark red stain appeared on her thighs just below the bandage, and she knew she must be more careful. Her mother would have more to criticize if Rhonda should let complications develop in that wound. And if it weren't healed by the weekend, Carlton would be upset at her. She was booked for eight shows, and they needed every cent she could earn between now and Thanksgiving.

Rhonda spent the rest of the lesson time sitting with her leg propped up. She wrote the new steps in her notebook, knowing she could practice them in a day or two when the wound closed.

When she got home that evening, she found that her mother had gone to a lecture. Since the leg was hurting again, Rhonda went straight to bed without even calling Carlton for an evening chat. The next morning the leg still throbbed, but not as badly as the day before.

"Would you mind if I use the car today?" Rhonda's mother asked at breakfast.

"Not at all. I can take the bus just as easily. In fact, I'd rather. I cut my knee yesterday, and driving might put too much strain on it."

"Ummm. Well, don't do anything foolish. Your legs are your fortune, you know."

Rhonda was ready to tell her mother about her experience with the friendly young minister, but she sensed her mother's preoccupation and decided this wasn't a good time to bother her. Women's Club meetings were on Wednesdays, and Mother spent the whole day planning and worrying. Rhonda knew that her mother considered the Women's Club her only real source of joy, outside of playing cribbage with the girls, and that she was proud to have been elected president for another term.

So off Mother went, leaving Rhonda to finish breakfast alone and do up the dishes. Rhonda breathed a sigh of relief. At least Mother had not scolded her about her leg. If there was anything Rhonda dreaded, it was being reprimanded. Her mother and friends thought the reason she was such an excellent dancer was that Rhonda had a natural talent for dancing. But in private Rhonda often told herself that the only reason for her success at dancing was her great dislike for being scolded. In fact, Rhonda spent much of her spare time upstairs in her bedroom to avoid having a run-in with her mother. In the privacy of her room she

LOVE STORY

spent hours reading love stories or daydreaming. But she also kept handy several notebooks in which she composed dance routines. This way she wouldn't be telling a lie when she told Mother she had to go up and work on a routine.

On the bus to Springfield, Rhonda read the little pamphlet. It was all about Creation and redemption and gave a strange reason for keeping the Ten Commandments. Always before, Rhonda had considered the commandments something to keep for fear of receiving God's wrath. But the pamphlet pointed out that anyone who accepts Jesus as a personal Saviour receives eternal life and escapes God's vengeance. The reason we keep God's commands, according to the Bible, is that we love Jesus for his great mercy and sacrifice for us. The pamphlet also pointed out that when we love someone we do the things which please that person. So the Bible tells a way that we can show the world and God whether or not we are true believers. Rhonda jotted down the two texts in her dancing notebook: John 14:15 "If ye love me, keep my commandments." John 14:21: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him."

Rhonda was thrilled to think that she would not receive eternal damnation if she should break one of the commandments. Jesus had taken care of that for her. But she was determined now, more than ever before, to follow God's commands and be called one of His children.

As for the Creation story, she was glad to read that there were so many biblical references to back it up. She hadn't been able to accept the theory of evolution taught in her high school biology class and had wished, back then, that she might have some Bible texts to give Mr. Draper, the biology teacher.

Perhaps I'll write down these texts and send them to Mr. Draper, she thought. Maybe he'll think twice before he teaches about evolution again.

Arriving at Springfield that morning, Rhonda transferred to another bus instead of walking the entire length of Main Street as she usually did. The leg still hurt some, and the cut oozed occasionally. When she got off the second bus in front of the studio, she looked up and down both sides of the street, then peered through the pet shop window. But neither the green pickup truck nor the young minister was in sight.